

Forest Conversion Mitigation Proposal

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Permanent loss of forest to urban and agricultural development is a significant source of carbon dioxide emissions in Washington State. Such conversion also imposes increased social costs such as loss of productive timberlands, increased storm water runoff, loss of fish and wildlife habitat, and loss of recreational access. The 2007 Climate Advisory Team identified slowing or stopping forest conversions as the most promising way to reduce GHG emissions from the forest sector in Washington State.

Developing incentives and other policy programs to slow forest conversion is therefore a high priority. In addition to looking for ways to enhance smart growth and transfer of development rights programs as a way to incentivise forest landowners to stay in forestry, we propose the use carbon mitigation fees as a complimentary policy tool to slow conversion rates. The TDR/carbon offset program we propose will capture some proportion of potential development and funnel it to urban and urban growth areas, and reduce the footprint of development in rural areas. However, it is unlikely to prevent all land-use conversion. In addition, small forest landowners have expressed the desire for programs that enhance their ability to practice carbon enhancing forest management practices as a source of additional income as a means to forestall a decision to sell their properties to development interests.

We propose that a mitigation fee be charged for all forestland conversions that are not captured by a voluntary TDR/forest carbon offset program. These fees would be charged by counties as development applications are processed. They would be assessed based on the amount of carbon that would be lost from clearing the land and lost future carbon sequestration potential. The monies collected would be used as a source of funding for carbon sequestration projects for small forest landowners. Such projects would need to meet high offset verification standards and be considered permanent from a climate change perspective - i.e., be committed to for 100 years or be subject to reversal penalties.

We think such a program could provide an incentive for forest land developers to reduce the size of their footprint and provide an important source of funding for a group of landowners that is particularly at risk of forest conversion. We also think that such a program is justified on the basis that carbon emissions from conversion impose a cost on society and are not at this time accounted for in the state's GHG emissions inventory of emissions or in its reduction targets. The absence of such a proactive approach will make it more difficult for the state to meet its GHG emission reduction targets under HB 2815. The combination of a voluntary offset program through TDRs and other smart growth programs plus the use of mitigation fees should reduce the annual emissions caused by forest conversion and provide an important source of income for small forest landowners to keep them in forestry.